The Rise of Digital Misogynoir-Face: Exploitation of Stereotypes for Entertainment and Profit

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Abstract

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Digital blackface is a type of rebranding of the minstrel blackface. Revisiting the same stereotypes and demeaning nature, digital blackface has evolved through the usage of memes, GIFs, and videos. Through this evolution, Black men have joined the fray and isolated the Black woman to become the target of stereotyped humor. This paper will provide an analysis of how Black men using blackface have now evolved to what can now be referred to as digital misogynoir-face. Highlighting the ways that misogynoir through comedy has reified the harmful ways in which the Black woman is depicted. This paper examines the contemporary Black male-parodying Black-women performances of digital blackface. Thus, leading to the creation and circulation of memes through digital networks such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This paper will discuss Black male comedians Martin Lawrence's character of Sheneneh in his sitcom Martin (1992-1997) and Tyler Perry's character of Madea in his films (2005-present).

Introduction

The rise of digital racism has sparked the emergence of digital blackface. But what ***IS*** digital blackface? Simply put, digital blackface is a type of minstrelsy for the internet age that comes in many forms. Oftentimes digital blackface refers to non-Black individuals depicting Black people or skin tones for the purpose of entertainment or self-expression. What I will explore, however, is a particular type of intraracial digital blackface performance where Black male performers don Black-woman-face or what I will call digital misogynoir-face. Moya Bailey defines misogynoir as the "racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization."[1] Rather than taking place on stage or television, today's Black-woman-face performances primarily circulate on the internet through social media platforms. Through social networking apps that are downloaded by individual users to their mobile device, the rise of digital misogynoir-face emerges and picks up steam. Digital misogynoir is a type of minstrelsy for the internet age that comes in many forms.

This paper examines contemporary Black male-parodying Black-women performances of digital blackface and their creation and circulation of memes through TikTok, Instagram and Twitter. I will look at how Black men using blackface has evolved as a cultural practice from the late 1990s through present and as new technologies are introduced. I will also look at the history of intraracial and cross-gender performances of blackface. Specifically, I discuss Black male comedians Martin Lawrence's character of Sheneneh in his sitcom Martin (1992-1997) and Tyler

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[1] Bailey. (2021). Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance. New York University Press. Bailey discusses the ways that misogynoir is directed towards Black women in popular culture and that discussion can be extended to social media and other forms of visual media.

Perry's character of Madea in his films (2005-present). Lawrence's and Perry's parodies have catapulted the now ubiquity of Black women as memes through digital platforms. I focus on these two depictions because Lawrence and Perry are two of the most well-known men in entertainment who have monetized the comedic portrayals of Black women.

These depictions of Black men presenting themselves as a Black woman under the guise of comedy perpetuates a type of controlling image of how Black women are perceived to the world. As Patricia Hill Collins (2002) argues, controlling images "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be neutral, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). Although Collins is writing in general about images of Black women, this concept can be further examined due to the constant bombardment of images shared throughout social media. Moya Bailey (2021) created the term "misogynoir" to discuss the concept of how such images and depictions have advanced the degradation of Black women through "hypervisibility and invisibility" within society and reifies the anti-Black woman animus.

Misogynoir is used by Bailey (2021) to describe the anti-Black misogynistic venom that Black women experience particularly in American visual and digital culture. This term is a "portmanteau of misogyny, the hatred of women and *noir*, the French word for *Black*, which also carries a specific meaning in film…to describe the gritty, cynical, and cruel themes for the time" (6). It can be argued that this misogynoir is an indication that there is a "brand of hatred directed at Black women in American visual and popular culture" (Johnson, 2021, 424). By focusing on visual platforms rather than text-based characterizations, this paper aims to provide a clear understanding of the images and videos that can be identified and categorized as digital blackface, a kind of comedic misogynoir. To understand digital blackface and misogynoir, we

must step back and discover the roots of blackface. Only then will we be able to see how this form of entertainment has evolved from stage productions to media, and thus prepare to understand the status of such social media representations.

Blackface Minstrelsy of the Past

The portrayal of blackface happens when people darken their skin with shoe polish, greasepaint or burnt cork and paint on enlarged lips and other exaggerated "Black" features. Blackface originated with the use of theatrical makeup and acting by non-Black performers to become a caricature of a Black person. William Mahar (1999) states that the primary convention that identified blackface in a minstrel show was the "burnt cork makeup, which was a combination of burned, pulverized champagne corks that served as a racial marker…and masking device allowing actors to shield themselves from any direct personal and psychological identification with the material they were performing" (1). One thing to note is that the very champagne cork that was used to create these Black characters would not have been drunk by those people that the burnt cork represented. This seems to be a subtle way to remind the audience and the performer of the social and economic differences between the minstrels and the Black body. Blackface dates to centuries-old European theatrical productions, most famously, Shakespeare's *Othello* in 1604.[2] The images and performances of blackface became popularized in the United States beginning in the early 19th century[3], as it contributed to the spread of racist

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[2] Shakespeare, W. (1604) *Othello.* Although this play took place at a time where the notion of blackface may not have been considered, the white actors that portrayed this role most likely darkened their skin. Although the character is a Moor, most critics refer to this to mean "of dark skin" or ambiguously African. I'd also like to point out that in the times of Shakespeare all female characters were actually men and that was the case in minstrel shows.

[3] Holland, J. (2019). *Racist History of blackface Began in the 1830s.* AP News. This article provides insight to the origins of blackface and how it became an American form of entertainment. Minstrel shows were the only depiction of Black life that white audiences saw and was seen as the correct narrative.

stereotypes towards the Black population and developed into what is now widely known as Minstrel Shows.

Minstrel shows gained traction in 1828 after Thomas Rice donned blackface as his created character named "Jim Crow."[4] These popularized shows were performed through the North and South and quickly garnered the attention of abolitionists and politicians. In 1848, after watching a minstrel show, abolitionist Fredrick Douglass stated that blackface performers "have stolen from us the complexion denied to them by nature…to make money and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens" (Douglass, 1848). The idea that blackface dehumanizes the Black community by reinforcing negative stereotypes was shared by many, such as Ralph Ellison (1972) who explains blackface minstrelsy thusly:

> "When a white man steps behind the mask of the [blackface] trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell…and thus lose that freedom which, in the fluid "traditionless," "classless" and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone" (53).

Ellison (1972) is pointing out the ways in which the fears towards the Black man and the sense of the otherness while miming something as obscure as skin, can be used as a symbol of an unfortunate nightmare for the white performer. Although fascinating, the idea that one could become Black, even if trapped momentarily, was terrifying.

[4] Grosvenor, E. and Toll, R. (2019). Blackface: The Sad History of Minstrel Shows. *American Heritage.* 64(1). This article was published after the governor and attorney general of Virginia were outed as wearing blackface in their college years. The article states in bold red letters "The ghosts of our past are not so far removed from contemporary American life as many of us think" and it continues to ring true.

The dehumanization of Black Americans was seen as a joke and just good fun for the American audience (Grosvenor and Toll, 2019). Yet, throughout this paper there will be evidence provided that this trend has not changed. Ellison (1972) argues that the ramification of the joke that was blackface relied on the awareness and control of the one laughing. The audience was aware that the performer on stage was a white man disguising himself, so there was no sense of alarm or fear. This caused the audience to feel more at ease with laughing at the jokes and situations presented to them. After all, those who were in power had the upper hand regarding this trickster who was entertaining the masses. The ones laughing at the time were white society, which held the possession of power to laugh and exploit the Black body. A quick search on any social media platform will provide proof that this trend has continued to be present in society through videos, memes, and other forms of digital communication.

In the past, white performers donned blackface and imitated what they perceived to be Black characteristics in order to entertain the masses. Toll (1974) states that blackface minstrel performances were a form of entertainment that was prejudicial, stereotypical, vile, racist, and vulgar[5]. This was due to the overly exaggerated ways that white performers presented themselves as Black. These exaggerations were through the clothing, speech, bodily features, and extreme dark coloration of the skin. According to Clark (2021) "blackface became popular in the U.S. after the Civil War as white performers played characters that demeaned and dehumanized African Americans" and was seen as a form of entertainment. The abolition of slavery seemed to have lit a spark of hatred through entertainment, that white America stoked and sought to spread throughout America. At the same time, blackface performances ignited the flame that led to the commodification of memories of a white nostalgia that longed for the antebellum period and

[5] Toll, R. (1974). Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America. New York: Oxford University Press. Toll digs deep into the history of minstrelsy and how it was popularized and widespread in the United States. By distorting the features of Black Americans, minstrel shows distorted the representations of the Black individual.

what could be mistaken as the good ol' days. These performances may have pulled at the heartstrings of the audience members when Al Jolsen performed the song "Mammy" in the film *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 while wearing blackface.[6] It is not without the notion that the memories of the antebellum south were often omitting the terror of slavery and focused on the pleasant life of white society and riddled with selective historic amnesia. This clinging to the imagined or misplaced historical past has continued currently through the new iterations of blackface.

One century later, Sammond (2015) argues that blackface has made a comeback in the twenty-first century, especially on television and has now risen in popularity on social media. The performances of blackface were intended to be funny solely to white audiences, without care for how it would be consumed by the Black community as demeaning and hurtful. blackface has, as Sammond (2015) states, "always been a creature of its time: it refracts contemporary anxieties about the power and meaning of whiteness through nostalgic fantasies about Blackness" (5). These fantasies thrive on the concept that Blackness could be played and later put aside to avoid the stigmas and dangers that real Black people often endure (Jones 2018). Blackface promotes demeaning stereotypes of Black people and further pushes the agenda to white notions of superiority. Lott (2013) discusses how the minstrel show was an approved context of institutional control that sought to manipulate Black culture and defend white America (40). When these minstrels portrayed Blackness as feral and unrestrained, it communicated to audiences that Black people were hopelessly uncultivated and seen as incapable of being taken seriously.

Blackface performances as Wagner (1973) points out, were the "base [of] Negro folk art, either comic or lachrymose, plagiarized, staged, and frequently falsified by low grade white

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[6] Crossland, A. (1927). *The Jazz Singer*. Warner Bros. This was the first feature film with sound that was a success in America. Jolsen was a Jewish American entertainer that donned blackface for the film. The character who Jolsen portrayed wished to be a jazz singer and the only way to achieve that and to be hidden was to become a minstrel.

actors who ‘played Negros’ by Blackening their faces with burnt cork.”[7] Several archetypes were portrayed as a way to make light of and find humor in the persecutions that the Black populous endured. Minstrelsy replicated a northern white fantasy of Black American life and culture, focusing mainly on plantation life, “as populated by lazy Black folk wallowing in a sensual torpor, almost devoid of higher mental and moral functions” compared to their white counterparts (Sammond 2015). Toll (1973) explains that minstrelsy arose because of whites' need to explore the changing social environment that they lived in: "Precisely because people could always just laugh off the performance, because viewers did not have to take the show seriously, minstrelsy served as a ‘safe' vehicle through which its primarily Northern, urban audiences could work out their feelings about even the most sensitive and volatile issues" (65). Exploring the social environment wearing the mask of stereotypes of Black people invited the “dissemination and the authentication of the mythical portrait which is deeply rooted in the American popular tradition” to become popularized once more (Wagner 48). Through this representation, Black Americans were characterized and illustrated to be ignorant and childlike in opposition to the educated white counterparts in this staged performance.

The power of blackface must be understood as a media creation that “was an admission of fascination with Blacks and Black culture” (Lott, 2013, 101). This fascination of blackface became popular due to the Black body being transformed to appease the white audience. Lott (2013) points out, blackface was reinvented by its white performers as a structured set of white responses which had developed from “northern and frontier social rituals” and filtered as a racist

[7] Wagner, J. (1973). *Black Poets of The United States.* This book is an analysis of slavery’s impact on the Black psyche and religious feelings that examine the Black expressions throughout the nineteenth century. The section I focused on is the chapter that dives into the stereotypes that stemmed from minstrelsy and how it affected the Black individual. Oftentimes people just say that blackface was done with shoe polish, but the notion that the cork of a champagne bottle was used is interesting. Here is a beverage sipped by high society and those in power and the part that is thrown out, the cork, is used to Blacken the skin. Almost as if this trash is worth more than the Black trauma that it causes.

assumption of what Blackness embodied. Lott (2013) explains that this is due to "more than a hundred years [where] white people were so politically, historically, emotionally, and sexually bound up with Black culture" that the enjoyment of minstrel blackface was a cultural part of being white in America. Lantos (2004) contends that minstrel shows were made appealing due to the pressure to "define one's place in society…because they clearly labeled Black people in the inferior positions that calmed white northerners" resulting in Black caricatures. These racist caricatures and impersonations that were widely accepted in the 19th century have now resurfaced as digital blackface.

Digital Blackface

I examine digital blackface by utilizing George Gerbner's (1969) cultivation theory of American cinema, which explains the overall effect of how media images are seen by a person from infancy to adulthood. Such exposure can cultivate one's ideas of social realities concerning certain aspects of not just another's culture, but one's own culture. Although Gerbner (1969) based the theory in terms of television and its viewers, the theory can be applied to social media audiences and how the viewers understand race, gender, and stereotypes.

Tosaya and Joseph (2021) argue that digital blackface is a rebranding of the past through contemporary text-based appropriation of Black vernacular or image-based abuse of Black individuals. This commodification of Blackness within the digital realm is one in which "race is technology," according to Beth Coleman (2009), where the questions of the biological and genetic systems that have historically dominated its definition are removed and it is denatured from its historical roots. This denaturing of race through technology refers to the histories of racism that are ubiquitous in society, yet seldom discussed. The circulation of blackface throughout history illustrates the memetic qualities that allow the images of Black people to be

commodified as mass entertainment. This is a way that society portrays the Black body as an object to be manipulated and altered for the audiences that view and utilize blackface. This portrayal will often show the Black body to exist within the same stereotyped tropes within American culture.

Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term "culture industry" to outline how commercial producers of mass culture use technology to justify the production of consumer products for culture and leisure, which "'infect[s] everything with sameness'" (Bryne, 665). Adorno also implies that blackface's memetic qualities are not only critical to its "life" in circulation, but that the culture industry's corrupt, white supremacist, profit-oriented mindset has kept blackface alive.

Through the culture industry, digital blackface becomes digital once it has been viewed and shared through digital devices. This blackface is not just other races blackening their skin, but it is the use of Black bodies, personalities and perceived emotions of Black people represented digitally and reminiscent of minstrelsy through stage performances. This culture industry, as Adorno and Horkheimer speak of, has a form of social currency that is gratifying for those who utilize the memes, gifs, videos, and other examples of digital blackface. By receiving acknowledgement and adoration from those who are part of the digital transaction, the sender obtains recognition in the forms of retweets, likes, duets and other forms of recognition.

While digital blackface may not appear to have the same consequences of blackface minstrelsy "its usage and circulation in digital language and communication normalizes racist attitudes in culture and society" can be harmful (Erinn, 2019). Digital blackface is evidence that the intersection of racism and humor has been virulent historically and intertwined in American

culture. Digital blackface in mass media entertainment reflects the racist attitudes in society, but also shapes how its users view racial identities.

Black Representations of Blackface

Historically we are taught through our history books about the problems with how white society portrayed Black individuals in these minstrel shows[8]. But what about when Black actors performed in blackface? Blackface makeup was also donned by Black performers especially in solely Black minstrel shows. These Black minstrel troupes first appeared in the 1850s.[9] According to Holland (2019), early Black actors were forced to don blackface if they wished to perform for more lucrative white audiences. For example, William Henry "Master Juba" Lane[10] was a well-known tap dancer in the 19th century and was forced to perform in blackface until his fame reached international proportions. Only after Lane achieved celebrity status was he permitted to perform with an all-white minstrel troupe sans blackface (Holland, 2019).

Black minstrel troupes first appeared in the 1850s, but it was not until after the Civil War that Blacks had established themselves in minstrelsy (Lantos 2004). Black minstrel troupes attempted to shape entertainment differently than white minstrel shows and reflected popular culture. In fact, "although within a heavily stereotyped framework, Black minstrels clearly demonstrated the diverse talents of Black people. In the nineteenth century, minstrelsy was their only chance to make a regular living as entertainers, musicians, actors, or composers" (Toll,

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[8] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2020, September 2). *minstrel show*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/art/minstrel-show. The earliest minstrel shows were white minstrels that painted their faces black, while singing and dancing like what they perceived Black slaves to be.
[9] Lantos, T. (2004). African American Sheet Music. *Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship.* Latos discusses the faults and merits of the American minstrel show.
[10] Peters. P. J. (2010). William Henry/Master Juba Lane (1825-CA. 1852). *Black Past.* Lane is credited as the most influential figure in the creation of American tap dance. Lane opened a dance school in London and received top billing as the only Black performer among a troupe of white minstrels that appeared onstage without blackface.

214). As Lott (1993)[11] argues, Black performance is performative as a cultural invention and is a product of self-commodification. These attempts were thwarted due to, as Graham (2018) points out, the "financial instability, racial degradation, physical danger, and the psychological toll of performing slave stereotypes" for seemingly, their entire career.[12] Black minstrels performed caricatures of slave culture that had been imagined by white performers, to appease the white audience. Graham (2018) argues that as Black performers discovered, the commercial sphere was ruled by white taste, and success rested on maintaining the fiction that they were offering up an authentic slice of Black culture. Watkins (2012) has argued that in order to carve out more autonomy, Black performers had to maintain a delicate balance, satirizing white notions about Black people without reinforcing negative stereotypes. Therefore, as Lantos (2004) posits, while many people cannot understand why Black performers were willing to enter the minstrel scene, it is important to underscore the financial difficulties of the time and the economic incentives with which they were faced.

Black "Women" in Minstrel Shows

Black minstrel troupes often portrayed a caricature of the Black woman. These depictions of the Black woman constituted two main categories: the jezebel and the mammy. Thompson Moore (2021) states that these two representations have distinct histories, one of morally unrestrained hypersexuality, while the other is devoid of sexual desires and matronly. Within each representation, Black women have been negatively characterized in popular culture. The mammy is "usually big, fat, and cantankerous" which is the opposite of the jezebel (Bogle 1994). Thompson Moore (2021) argues that "the jezebel refers to assumptions about enslaved women's

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[11] Lott, E. (1993). *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP. Lott discusses Black performance and how these performances were seen as a way to survive.

[12] Graham, Sandra Jean. (2018). *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*, University of Illinois Press.

over-sexualized nature and the mammy being constructed through popular culture as evidence that Black women were natural caretakers of white children and happy with their status."[13] Each of these stereotyped caricatures were satirizing social images of Black people and further contributed to the negative stereotypes that white audiences already held (Graham, 2018). Having Black men cast as Black women invites the audience to be more at ease because there is an insider poking fun of themselves.

This degradation of the Black woman is portrayed through crossdressing and drag performances seen within the minstrel shows of the past and currently through mainstream comedies. While historically the term cross-dressing was defined by Edward Carpenter in 1911, to reference males who enjoy wearing feminine attire or referring to an action or behavior of a male in feminine clothing, this definition is out of date. Currently Roanyer (2022) discusses crossdressing as a broad category including different reasons for the act, while drag's purpose is art and entertainment. Gilbert (2014) explains that cross-dressing in the contemporary Western sense is the "wearing clothing not belonging to one's birth-designated sex" (65). Scholars such as Hao and Zi (2019) have defined cross-dressing as also wearing clothing and ornaments related to the opposite sex in a particular society, in addition to switching the gender symbol by changing clothing and replacing the gender identity at the "level of the signifier in an attempt to gain the public recognition" of their image (92). According to Roanyer (2022) drag has been "linked to theaters and performances…[where] female impersonators performed" since the mid-20th century. The history of men crossdressing, however, can be traced to the Roman emperor Heliogabalus, in 218 AD. In scholarship drag performance and crossdressing have been defined

[13] Thompson Moore, K. (2021). *The Wench: Black Women in the Antebellum Minstrel Show and Popular Culture*. This author highlights the negative caricatures that are often neglected in scholarship, and these are the ones that will be analyzed in the two images within this article.

as the act of wearing clothing not commonly associated with one's sex for the purposes of disguise, comedy, and self-expression.[14]

The images analyzed should not be confused with how drag performances are a celebration of the glamorous and desirable. The images and performances to be analyzed also deviate from the idea of drag/crossdressing and are more so caricatures that are meant to be perceived as a purposeful exaggeration of undesirable features and personalities. This is due to how we have come to understand drag performance, and the men who are donning these Black women forms, are constantly pushing back and stating that the performances are not meant to be seen as drag or crossdressing.

As discussed by Moore (2020) the construction of Black women being represented within the crossdressing in the forms of entertainment has often been celebrated. These gendered performances are used by Lawrence and Perry for comedic purposes and as a way to reinforce dominant ideologies about Black women viewed as hypersexual or an obedient domestic servant. Hill Collins (2002) discusses that these portrayals of women are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). This can occur when there is an influx of these images viewed daily, that it becomes the social norm. Harris (2014) discusses that through the "gestures, styles, body types, and personality characteristics stereotypically linked to Black Women", the Black

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[14] "cross-dress." (2016). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.* Houghton Mifflin Company. The solid definition and the hyphen of "cross-dress" seems to be contested throughout research and sources. This definition is the current one used in dictionaries. It would seem that cross dressing is done in secret, while dressing in drag is done performatively. While the dictionary defines crossdressing as the act of wearing clothing not commonly associated with one's sex for the purposes of disguise, comedy, and self-expression. Queer Studies scholars note that cross-dressers, commonly defined as individuals who wear clothing and take on an appearance and behavior considered by a given culture to be appropriate for another gender but not one's own, have often been misunderstood and maligned, especially in societies with strict, dichotomous gender roles (Beemyn, 2015).

woman's status in society as an outsider to be ridiculed is further established through these images.[15]

Thompson Moore (2021) argues that the actions of those who represent Black women in stereotyped ways have been widely received by the public with adoration, laughs and a lack of concern for the Black women whom they are deriding through their performances. This is due to "the drag aspect of the [Black minstrel] woman caricature [being] well-documented in scholarship; however Black women who were the source of the mockery and degradation have been ignored" (p. 320). The ways that Black women are represented in minstrel shows and within the digital blackface presently, have remained consistent. Black women misrepresentations in entertainment are occasionally another aspect of misogynoir and how these depictions cause harm to Black women and further shows the ways that Black women have been disregarded for the sake of comedy.

Black Memes

When looking at internet memes and viral media, it is easy to be caught in the whirlwind of humor and laughable content. Yet if we take time to understand how internet memes are signs, which in semiotics is the quality of a thing to communicate meaning, then we as an audience can focus on how these signs are produced with the intention of communication, as Varis and Blommaert (2015) argue. Memes, according to Dawkins (2013), refer to virtually all self-replicating bits of culture that spread online and are often shared as an image or an image with text. These memes can be the cultural replicators that Dawkins (2013) argues are spreading like a virus and replicated infinitely. Memes, such as pictures or short video clips of Sheneneh and

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[15] Harris, S. (2014). *Gendered Attitudes and Interpretations: Examining Attitudes Towards the New Black American Minstrelsy.* NAAAS Conference Proceedings, 1729-1751.

Madea, are a visual argument or agreement from a society that has replicated the initial joke and will continue to be reproduced.

The character Sheneneh is one that was portrayed by Martin Lawrence in 1992 through 1997. Ankra (2016) describes Sheneneh as the sassy, ghetto, flashy, confrontational, and feisty neighbor within the sitcom *Martin.* This neighbor is often the brunt of the jokes when they are on screen and is seen as the unwanted nuisance that resides across the hall. Fontaine (2011) describes Madea as a creation of the filmmaker Tyler Perry, who is known for his extension of previous stereotypical forms of Black entertainment. Madea is introduced to audiences in 1999, and is described as “large in stature, brown-skinned, and prone to extreme violence that causes frequent encounters with law enforcement. Perry presents her character as a form of comedic relief for audiences” (Fontaine, 2). The effect of the Madea image, “reenacts historical and painful stereotypes” of Black Americans and thrusts its viewer backwards towards a more detrimental time in American entertainment (Musambira and Jackson, 2018). Each character that these Black men have created have preserved the negative stereotypes that are affiliated with the Black woman and furthering the dismissive attitudes within American society.

Memes in and of themselves are no different than any other cultural commodity which communicates something about *us* as a society in terms of our relationship to *them* and to *each other* (Wiggins 2019). The internet meme of Black comedic images is one that has been remixed throughout digital culture for the purposes of parody, satire, stereotypes, and other discursive activity. These memes generate a digital culture that comes from the interaction between human and computer (Wiggins 2019). Employing digital blackface or digital misogynoir, no matter how brief the performance or playful the intent, impacts the Black populace in a negative way. By

emitting exaggerated emotions of extreme joy, annoyance, anger and sadness, these images seem to further the negative stereotypes that society has thrust upon the Black body[16].

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1975) makes note of the ways in which television has changed the world since its inception as a mass medium in the twentieth century, a parallel to how the internet more recently has changed society and the human perspective. The digital culture that now links our online and offline interactions has created a type of unspoken acceptance of "humor" that has evolved to further divide American society. Digital blackface is troublesome to society, mainly Black society, as Storey (2006, 4) explains, "certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order" as a way to reproduce the social conditions that Black individuals were forced into by white society. The memes that are produced by the stereotyped representations of Black women are produced to maintain the renditions in the process of interpretation by the users or senders; meme use becomes a process of ideological formation that is indicative of an ideological practice in society (Wiggins 2019).

As Wiggins (2019) argues, an internet meme cannot exist without referring to something other than the subject matter it contains or displays. Shifman (2014) argues that intertextuality can be seen as "additional layers of meaning, associated with text", these memes of the Black woman often accompanied with text are a repackaging of televisual or movie content from Lawrence and Perry, but also of historical notions of blackface minstrelsy. This intertextual content allows for users to construct meaning from the image, whether it be intentionally targeted as a critique of a Black individual or not. This is where the viewing and sharing of memes as Wiggins (2019) posits, becomes "objectified, something to be studied, evaluated" and

[16] Jackson, L. (2017). *We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction Gifs.* This article discusses the recurring use of Black people as reaction GIFS and its implications of the broader Digital blackface. This is directly associated with the memes that will be analyzed.

dissected (41). By doing so, our gaze shifts from the scope of comedy to the scope of analysis of these images that are un/intentional racial stereotypes, ideologies or even allegories of Black women. The images of internet memes are "emblematic of identity construction in online spaces" and in physical societies (Wiggins, 2019). The images bleed into our everyday lives, often unbeknownst to the users.

Black Men Parodying Black Women

According to Chen et. al (2012), "when Black women see their gender and race demeaned through the male mammy image—the antithesis of America's concept of beauty in a society where beauty itself is white, they may feel marginalized by the discrepancy" between how Black women are portrayed and the societal norms (120). This willingness of society to be open to Black men using Black women as the brunt of their jokes can further delineate negative stereotypes.

Fig. 1
Facebook Meme

Much like other comedic memes that are found on social media, the Madea meme is one that has been used to describe the emotive ways that social media users are coping with the current pandemic (Fig 1). This meme of Tyler Perry's Madea was introduced in early 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic forced many individuals to stay within their residence. The meme is meant to show the various ways that this character is portrayed within each film that was produced and how the American audience can relate to each emotion. Notice the exaggerated emotions of extreme joy, annoyance, anger, and sadness. Madea's exaggeratedly emotive moods tend to be one excessive to the next, without a normal medium. These dispositions are most often a variation of jubilation, rage induced violence or over exaggeration of fatigue. In attempting to humorously convey the stages of emotion that we've all gone through in these pandemic times,

an exaggerated Black woman (as portrayed comedically by a man) works as a tool of amplification.

The meme invites the viewer to get through quarantine by “tapping into [their] inner Black woman…[because] inside every white girl is a strong Black woman ready to bust out” (Viruet, 2014). To understand why memes like these are problematic, I would like to provide a historical connection to unpack the ways that the above meme of Tyler Perry’s Madea has provided more harm than good, regarding Black women’s representation. Creating humor (as exaggeration often does), but at the expense of Black womanhood. Although the audience is being asked to identify with Madea, the collective ends up laughing *at* her instead, diminishing Black women further in the public mind.

The character in the meme is seen as a one dimensional being, when in fact Perry explains how the character was developed and why the audience embraces her. The name Madea is a contraction or rather a hybrid contracting of the words “Mother Dear.” In many Black southern families this term refers to the matriarch of a family, usually the mother or grandmother (Perkins, 2019). In Perry’s case, Madea is from a working-class or low-income family and has a very poor fashion sense. Similar to the now rebranded mammy figure that was the Aunt Jemima pancake mix, Medea parallels the advertising caricature of the late nineteenth century, and the blackface wenches of the western American vaudeville era, where the clothing and bright lipstick are all physical aesthetics that symbolize a Black ‘woman’s’ economic and social status in America. Milloy (2009) describes Madea as a portrayal by men to depict the “fattest, ugliest, Black woman that Hollywood makeup artists can conjure [making her] the super-mammy” (1). Yet these “women” are in fact, Black men donning the clothing of what is presumed to be a Black woman.

In contrast, scholars such as Whitfield and Johnson (2019) have pointed out that many love Madea for the character's way of not portraying a white-washed fairytale persona of what a Black woman's attributes are imagined to be. To have a character that assists in creating a meaningful story that is moving, rather than having the "happily ever after" ending, is something that has led to the character's continuation within the Perry franchise. Although the stage productions as discussed by Whitfield and Johnson (2019) focused more on the religious aspects of the character Madea and her family, "the character of Madea performs for different audiences by examining how the roles of violence, religion and wisdom operate on stage and screen" all while not questioning or even acknowledging that the character was a Black man in drag (430).

In his 2008 article, "The Funny Thing about Black Men in Dresses," James Hannaham discusses the phenomena of the presence of Black actors and/or comedians dressed in drag and how prevalent it is that the racist caricatures that existed during the times of minstrel shows in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, still remain in modern, twenty-first-century American cinema. These caricatures are sometimes intertwined with minstrelsy and a visual combination of the negative stereotypes that have been thrust upon the Black woman. It seems that as a Black entertainer, there is a social prejudice that inhibits the success of the entertainer if there is an unwillingness to shuck and jive like the entertainers of the past. Black women in film and memes are often portrayed in three primary, stereotypical ways: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire.

Stereotypes, according to Gammage (2016), such as the "welfare queen, illegitimate baby-mama, and the jezebel have infiltrated the news media" have resulted in being the primary narrative of the Black woman (11). When Black women see their gender and race demeaned through the male impersonation of the mammy image—the antithesis of America's concept of beauty (Jewell, 1993) in a society where "beauty itself is white" (Harris, 1990, 597)—they may

feel marginalized by the discrepancy between how people similar to them are portrayed and the societal norms (Perkins, 1996). Although scholars of the past have stated these findings, they ring true in our current society. This is shown through what Coleman et al. (2020) argue as a "perceived realism as a variable that may explain the relationship between reality TV consumption and endorsement of stereotypes" (184). This perceived realism is the ways that Black-oriented entertainment is consumed within society and the ways that the public accepts these portrayals.

Since the early 1900s, one of the strongest stereotypical portrayals of Black women in the mass media has been as the mammy. The mammy archetype originated during slavery as a counter to the lusty Jezebel, whose caricature developed out of slavery to justify sexual abuse by masters onto the slave women (Pilgrim, D., 2000, para 6). The representations of both Black women depicted them as less than human (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). The stereotype that closely resembles the Madea character physically is the embodiment of a Mammy. Mammy is a desexualized character who is old, overweight, and formidable in stature (Pieterse, 1990, 228). Mammy represents a void of sexual and sensuality and was constructed deliberately to represent a body that exudes ugliness and repulse (Pilgrim, D., 2000, para 6). To depict the Black woman in this way, has made it so that the Black woman can only been seen as an object of sex and once used and of no consequence the vessel now becomes the nurturer for the family.

Pilgrim (2000) states that "the mammy caricature, and, like all caricatures...contained a little truth surrounded by a larger lie. The caricature portrayed an obese, coarse, maternal figure…was posited as proof that Blacks -- in this case, Black women -- were contented, even happy, as slaves" (2). The Mammy portrays a class of women that are often ignored, discriminated against, and misrepresented. The concept of the mammy was constructed in the 1830s as a stout, dark-skinned, smiling, hardworking, doting woman who offered the only

“redeeming embodiment of Black womanhood imaginable within the intertwined race, class, and gender distinctions of the ‘Old South’” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 28). This woman was seen as a non-threatening being, that was to be trusted to raise and rear the children of others.

Of course, Madea is neither content nor doting, so another stereotype is at play here. Originating as an adaptation of the Mammy, the Sapphire began as the ‘Sassy Mammy’ (“Sapphire Caricature”, n.d.). This woman ran her household, and her sassiness was accepted by the white people surrounding her causing her to be immune to violent retaliation (“Sapphire Caricature”, n.d.). The Sapphire is another description of ‘The Angry Black Woman’ that Madea represents by embodying the attitude and sass that is associated with Black women (Yarbrough & Bennett, 2000, 638). In the image above, you can see the demonstratively emotive ways that Madea is portrayed. There are some panels within the meme that conceal the gun that Madea is famously known to carry. This concealment can represent the thought that although happy, irritated or sad…the Black woman is thought to conceal her inherent violence for the sake of a laugh. Or simply this concealment can represent the fact that no matter how much of a happy Mammy Madea may appear, some audiences will always think that these images within the meme are what Black women are like.

As Stephanie Allen (2016) remarks, “We cannot simply dismiss his [Perry’s] stereotypical representations as humor or claim uncritically that they are basic truths about Black life. Stereotypes have real-life consequences for Black people . . . so we must seriously consider the impact of the material reality of these negative images on Black lives and on Black women in particular” (79). This positionality of Madea’s character influences how society perceives Black women by reifying the conception that Black women fit into the above categories of the Jezebel, Mammy, or Sapphire.

Madea as the Mammy is an extreme opposite of the Jezebel stereotype wherein the Black woman has been portrayed as hypersexual in her younger years. For Black women, stereotypes have been used to dehumanize them, depriving them of their "womanhood, self-respect, and social status" (King, 1973, 14). These "portrayals of Black men dressing up as exaggeratedly overweight Black women are examples of portrayals that have the power to bolster stereotypes, which may depersonalize how individual Black women see themselves" (Chen et. al). What once began as a stage production for Black church audiences, soon snowballed and became mainstream through film and now digitally shared on mobile devices.

The character of Madea that was once a type of inside joke for the Black community, has now evolved to be one of the many negative illustrations of the Black woman. The joke being that the matriarch of the family is god-fearing, loving, strong, and not one to be trifled with. This inside joke has now been widespread in society that it should be noted that there are equal if not more white audiences laughing, than there Black audiences. The intended or assumed audience can be argued to focus solely on the Black family, due to the nature of the jokes and slang used throughout. In an interview that discussed the audience for his films were forty percent non-Black audiences, Perry stated that he "still has issues getting screens in white neighborhoods believe it or not" (Scott, 2020). Yet despite the growing diverse audiences, the inside jokes regarding Madea may be lost on audiences that do not fully understand the reasons why Perry sought to create Madea and why she is a part of many Black family units. In the digital realm, the context and creation of Madea is often lost in translation within audiences that are simply looking for the gag and laugh. Due to this unknown, the images and character of Madea become more stereotypical and taken out of context. As the character becomes more popular, the actual context becomes disseminated through the digital distribution.

Fig. 2
Lawrence as Sheneneh & Dawson as Shanaynay

The character of Sheneneh as depicted in the figure above was introduced in the sitcom *Martin* in the early 1990s by creator Martin Lawrence. This character was over the top with her actions, wardrobe, and voice. The catchphrases of "Oh My Goodness" and "Oh No You Didn't!" were often heard each time this character appeared on screen. Sheneneh is always portrayed with cheap gaudy jewelry, long acrylic fingernails, exaggerated buttocks, ill-fitting clothing, and dowdy hair extensions. All these details combined equate to what America has labeled as the ghetto trope for Black women. The ghetto trope stereotype is an example of the foundation of comedic racial misogynoir toward Black women through constant fetishization and commodification in mainstream media (Ankra, 2016). This ghetto image of the Black woman has been revamped throughout history with the same underlying context of hypersexuality of jezebels of the past.

Although the character of Sheneneh was first introduced over thirty years ago, its deleterious impact is still one that is still present today. Shane Dawson, a once popular white YouTube entertainer, introduced his own version of the ghetto fabulous Sheneneh in late 2008 through 2020. This character was given the unoriginal name "Shanaynay " and was quick to become popularized among Dawson's young audiences. Shananay became a recurring character throughout many of Dawson's videos. The first appearance of Shanaynay was featured in 2008 in a skit titled *Ghetto Drive-Thru from Hell* as the violent and foul-mouthed drive-thru employee. Despite Shananay's white skin tone with brown streaks of makeup, the character constantly insists that she is, "Black, just light-skinned."

This was not the first time that Dawson had appeared in blackface throughout his YouTube career, but this character was arguably the most popular. During the 2012 VidCom appearance, "[Dawson] invited teenage girls onstage and encouraged them to engage in what Dawson called 'ghetto pranks,' which included jokes about chicken and booty dances," according to Romano (2014). For years, Dawson, who has over 23 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, dressed up in blackface for his "comedic" sketches, made racially shocking remarks, repeatedly utilized the n-word, and somehow was never held accountable until late 2020.

According to Dawson in a later interview after his return to the online platform, he acknowledged the contribution that his channel had in the "normalization of blackface and the N-word" (Madani, 2020). Unsurprisingly, most of Dawson's white fans accepted the apology, although the apology was geared towards the Black people whom he had made monetary gains from their pain (Madani, 2020). The images of Dawson in the caricatured Jezebel blackface is one that will live on digitally through memes, GIFs and stitched videos on various platforms.

A recent search of the hashtags #Shanaynay, #Sheneneh, and #ShanaynayChallenge on the TikTok platform, resulted in videos that displayed TikTok users performing skits, lip syncing or pretending to personify different versions of the character. One hashtag (#Shanaynay) has over 8.6 million views and the numbers are steadily increasing with more users creating videos and duetting the older videos. Those participating in the challenges come from various nationalities and ages, but one thing that is common is the theme of trying to one up the other users and double-down on the "ghetto" vernacular and exaggerated hair/makeup. Due to cross-platform posting, these TikTok videos can be found on every digital platform and shared with multiple audiences all with one click on a cellular device. This one character from the late 1990s that would in the past be called the Jezebel archetype of the Black female, has now been resurrected on these digital platforms so that this stereotype lives on.

The image of Jezebel is one that originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Collins, 2002). Thompson Moore (2021) discusses that the Black Jezebel is seen as synonymous with sexual impropriety and immorality, allowing for white women, regardless of class, to become innately moral (5). Historian Kathleen M. Brown argues that the sixteenth and seventeenth century witnessed the rise of "racial opposition in which women of English descent embodied the privileges and virtues of womanhood while women of African descent shouldered the burden of its inherent evil, sexual lust." Historically, Black women have been negatively characterized in popular culture and now it is shown through internet memes that further racist and sexist stereotypes.

Much like the slavery-era Jezebel, who was claimed as desiring sexual relations with men, Sheneneh desires the same of her male counterparts. Johnson (2021) discusses the character Sheneneh in the sitcom *Martin*, and how the character is ripe with the stereotypical caricature of

the ghetto urban Black woman. Sheneneh “remains a fixture in Black popular culture, folded into one of the dominant discourses about Black women in popular culture: ratchetness” (428). Yet, the word “ratchet “in itself when defined, is gendered and is used towards the Black woman, or women in general. Rampley (2013) argues that being ratchet is characterized by a “loud obnoxious demeanor, a lack of education, and underprivileged” (2). Ratchet in its current form may be closely associated with the term ghetto and representing the lifestyle of a Black uncouth woman. Currently there has been a movement of reclamation of the term ratchet, to take the word and use it as an empowering phrase or attitude. Rap music, a historically and predominantly Black style of artistry (Conrad et al. 2009), and its spread through the United States popularized and revamped the term ratchet.

This attempt of reclamation of a term that was birthed in negativity, can temporarily become positive or empowering. Through the circulation and repetition within the internet, this fad of the word ratchet becoming a positive term towards women will eventually fade like all fads that have come before it. Within the internet, everything is instantaneous and gratifying for the user. These fads, memes, and gifs are quickly forgotten and dated. What we are left with are those who were targeted for the sake of rapid gratification. These memes and those who are modeled by the stereotypes have become disposable. In this case, it is the Black body that has become disposable. Where the Black image is being used and thrown away. Many types of stereotypes are represented, popularized, and discarded for entertainment purposes.

One such representation as Ramirez (2014) discusses is Lawrence’s Sheneneh, as the “ghetto girl” next door, adorned with gold jewelry, a large rear, elaborate hair, a loud voice and a sharp tongue. The name Sheneneh is apparently meant to poke fun of Black-sounding names. This embodiment of ratchet has seeped its way into Black popular culture through music and

dance (the Nae Nae). The all-male Black creators (We Are Toonz) of this dance state that the choreography is “just based on a ratchet girl in the club dancing…and the best girl to describe it is Sheneneh from *Martin*” (Ramirez, 2014). The celebration of this dance that has ties to negative terms such as “ghetto” and “ratchet” to describe Black women, further instills the notion of misogynoir. This idea that a dance craze was based on a fictional character that received so much adoration from Black audiences is astounding. This dance takes the digital image of Sheneneh and places it in another context that provides the viewers a glimpse into how there is a connection between the digital realm and the musical. The idea that Sheneneh was once streamed on television networks, then resurrected by a white content creator and now a staple within a search engine on mobile devices, shows just how embedded digital blackface is within everyday life.

In a study, Johnson (2021) discusses that while participants in a focus group “almost universally found the character [of Sheneneh] to be entertaining, many echoed the observations of critics who saw the character as little more than a ‘stereotypical caricature of a ghetto ‘homegirl’” (428). Interestingly, although these participants found the issues that arise from the misrepresentations of the Black woman, the character is yet another “rinse. Lather, and repeat” of the comedic schtick. This representation of Black women in mainstream media as Ankra (2016), argues, historically places, “successful Black cisgender male comedians [that] have dressed as Black women for comedy on TV” in the spotlight, and currently these portrayals can be seen through memes such as Sheneneh throughout social media. Through the transformation of internet memes, the caricatures of Black women have become a daily occurrence.

The Jezebel is depicted as a sexual commodity under the watchful eyes of men. Much like Foucault’s (1995) conception of “the gaze”, Black women subconsciously know their likeness is under constant evaluation in patriarchal society. When Black women see their gender

and race demeaned through the male Jezebel image they feel "marginalized by the discrepancy between how people similar to them are portrayed" and how society receives such images (Perkins, 1996). The images of Black people have "routinely been mocked and pilloried in America as subhuman and animalistic" in the past, and the Jezebel is just another example in the laundry list of racial stereotypes.

Conclusion

Digital blackface is problematic within digital communication due to its racist and negative stereotypes. The various forms of digital blackface resemble racist symbols and ideologies of the past and current society, through the caricatures that have now been revamped in various forms to appease the social media user. As the cultivation hypothesis illustrates, negative images of Black women portrayed by Black men unfortunately shape how they are treated in society. These caricatures of Black men and women are deleterious to everyone since anyone can be exploited for the sake of humor, and in the era of social media validation, there are no limits to what images will be used as the next meme.

Although digital blackface has evolved from blackface minstrelsy, it is polluting social media with an ever-increasing speed. There is the potential to slow the pace by bringing attention to the issue, but such an intervention can cause only a brief pause. History shows that minstrelsy will never completely disappear from America, but simply be reinvented to satiate the masses. As it is currently, blackface minstrelsy has morphed into digital blackface and is actively skewing societal perceptions of what Blackness contains. The memes that are shared are open to manipulation and could result in more harm towards the Black psyche. The manipulation being, taking images and emotions out of context and using them for digital clout. So, while memes and GIFs might appear harmless from the perspective of non-Black people, digital blackface perpetuates systemic racism at an ever-increasing speed.

By focusing on the depictions of Black women as the comedic scapegoat, this paper shows the ways in which memes illustrate narrow and controlling images of Black women. It is apparent that the history of using the Black body as a comedic gag has not faltered through time. In the case of digital misogynoir-face, the Black woman has become the brunt of the joke. Those who continue to share these images without the understanding of context, will further reify the stereotypes that have been thrust on the Black woman.

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Figures

Figure 1: MG Staffing. (n.d.) *What Stage of Quarantine Are You In?* [Facebook page]. Retrieved September 2022 from https://www.facebook.com/medialgroup.

Figure 2: [Martin Lawrence as Sheneneh Jenkins and Shane Dawson as Shanaynay]. (n.d.) https://www.kingofreads.com/black-women-are-the-newest-mascots/